

Satellite tags successfully deployed on Sei whales

FOLLOWING five previous years studying Balen whales around the Falklands, last year Falklands Conservation (FC) began a new Darwin Plus-funded project titled 'Advancing Falklands and region-scale management of globally important whale populations.' The previous work revealed the high importance of coastal waters as a summer feeding ground for endangered sei whales and as a winter mating and socialising area for southern right whales. However, there are ongoing gaps in understanding that limit the conservation and management of whales both in the Islands and within the wider south-west Atlantic. For example, how the whales move around the Islands, including in more offshore habitats, and how the Falklands' whale populations are linked with other Atlantic regions. To address some of these points, the latest Darwin Plus project includes the ambitious goal of carrying out the first satellite tracking of whales in Falklands' waters.

During March and April 2022, FC completed the initial field season of the project, which included one of the first attempts to place satellite tags on Sei whales anywhere globally. The aim is to understand more about the spatial movements of Sei whales, how they are using Falklands' waters to find food (i.e. the water depths that they dive to and spend most time in), their behaviour (e.g. whether their dive patterns and movements vary between day and night), and their exposure to human activities (e.g. ship collision risk).

The work was carried out with a FIG research permit, and with paramount importance placed on following international best practice approaches to ensure high standards of animal welfare. An experienced whale tagger, Rui Prieto from the Azores, came to the Islands to deploy the tags, and FC's new boat Elinor was handled by Steve Truluck (UK) who has significant experience with operating boats around whales. The tags were programmed to transmit GPS positions and satellite fixes, and to send detailed data on the dive behaviour of the whales. They were attached to the dorsal fin of the animals using a gas-powered rifle (the same used worldwide by vets to tranquilise large animals). Being a fast and elusive species, Sei whales are not easy to approach to the close distances (5 m) required to deploy the tags accurately and safely, and a great deal of patience was



needed by the project team. Fortunately, the field season had several days of calm weather and we experienced good Sei whale activity in Berkeley Sound, allowing us to achieve our target of putting tags on five whales during the 2022 season.

As expected with this challenging work, the five tags have had variable success. The maximum battery life for the tags is approximately three months, but we expected that some of them would fall off the animals well before the batteries ran out. In practice, two of the tags sent data for only a few days, although one came back to life a week later, by which time the animal had moved east and was two-thirds

of the way to South Georgia! One whale remained in Berkeley Sound for over three weeks after being tagged, and had just started to travel south down the east coast of the Falklands when the tag fell off. We received five weeks of data from another tag, where the animal stayed in Berkeley Sound for a week before moving south and spending time off Fitzroy, Bleaker, and in slightly deeper water off the south-west coast of the Falklands between Cape Meredith and New Island. The whale had entered Queen Charlotte Bay when the tag came off. Our final tag was placed on a Sei whale on 8th April and is still transmitting. That whale has not yet left Berkeley Sound, highlighting the

importance of the Sound as a foraging area for some individual sei whales. The tracks of the whales are available to follow in real-time at: <https://falklandsconservation.com/sci-whale-tracking/>

The satellite tracking has provided a unique perspective of what sei whales do while visiting the Falklands, and this information will help to inform how marine management can be delivered to conserve this endangered whale species, for which the Falklands is internationally recognised.

During July and August, the focus of the project will move to the Southern Right whale. Several tags will be programmed to record the same dive and movement data as we collected for the sei whales,



Top: Movements of tracked Sei whales around the Falkland Islands. Above: A tracker attached to a Sei whale fin.



Above: The Falklands Conservation RIB out to attach trackers to Sei whales. Inset: Sei whale Photos FC.



with the aim of understanding more about how the Right whales use Falklands' waters over the short-term. However, we will also deploy some tags that are programmed to collect location data only, which should double the battery life and provide information about where these whales go to after they leave the Islands

at the end of winter. The foraging areas used by Southern Right whales across their range remain poorly documented, and FC's work will therefore have conservation and management relevance across the Southern Hemisphere.

Dr Caroline Weir, FC Cetacean Ecologist

Total eclipse of the moon for Falklands

A total Lunar Eclipse took place in the early hours of the morning on May 16, inspiring photographers of the Islands to stay up to get photos of the Moon being eclipsed by Earth. The totality of the eclipse lasted for 42 minutes, and the night was clear, providing perfect conditions for photos.

Above: The "Blood Moon" eclipse in the early hours of May 16. Right: The Moon a few short hours before the eclipse. Photos: Stephen Luxton



The CFL Charitable Trust

Providing financial support for educational and training needs to the people of the Falkland Islands is one of the principle aims of the CFL Charitable Trust.

The Board of Trustees are inviting applications for educational and training awards up to £3,000 per successful applicant.

Applicants will need to show that they have attempted to secure funds from public sources prior to their application and demonstrate an intention to return to the Islands following their course and any necessary or relevant work experience. Priority will be given to Falkland Islands status holders.

NOW ACCEPTING APPLICATIONS

CLOSING DATE 31ST MAY 2022

Application forms are available from sharon.admin@cfl.co.uk or from the CFL offices at Raymar House, Lookout Industrial Estate, tel 22277

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Benjamin Franklin